

DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 344 183

CS 010 888

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TITLE Different Hats, Different Questions. Assessment Audiences/Questions/Answers.
PUB DATE 3 Mar 92
NOTE 11p.; Paper presented at a Conference of School Principals (New York, NY, March 3, 1992).
PUB TYPE Speeches/Conference Papers (150) -- Viewpoints (Opinion/Position Papers, Essays, etc.) (120)

EDRS PRICE MF01/PC01 Plus Postage.
DESCRIPTORS Audience Awareness; *Curriculum Evaluation; *Educational Assessment; Elementary Secondary Education; *Evaluation Methods; *Evaluation Needs; Informal Assessment; Information Sources; *School Community Relationship; *Student Evaluation
IDENTIFIERS Alternative Assessment; Questions

ABSTRACT

The kinds of questions administrators, teachers, parents, the community, and children ask from under each of their hats makes educators and others aware of the information needs that people have for judging the success of schooling. Each audience, each role, asks slightly different questions, and the information needed to answer those questions is different. Therein lies the fallacy of most discussions about educational assessment--people want to answer all of those questions with one type of information. Having a variety of assessment instruments and techniques allows educators to pick and choose according to their philosophical preferences, and provides appropriate information for each of the school's different constituencies. An assessment program needs the same kind of strategic design that teachers expect to find in the teachers' planning guide for a basic text series. A single device for assessing curriculum and instruction lies in the land of mythology, not in the land of the living. (A figure listing the typical questions asked by different people and the kinds of information needed to answer those questions, and a figure representing major constituents who ask assessment questions are included.) (RS)

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Assessment Answers

3-3-92

Assessment Audiences / Questions / Answers

Different hats, different questions

by

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As a teacher and a parent, I switched hats as needed in order to take care of my responsibilities. When I went to a parent-teacher conference to talk about my own children, naturally I wore my parent's hat. When I sat on the other side of the desk and discussed the students in my own class, I wore my teacher's hat. Many of us wear different hats to match our different roles. When we switch hats, we ask different questions.

As a parent, I may ask: "Is my child making normal progress in school?" "Is she keeping pace with other kids her age?" "Does he do things in class that would make me proud?"

As a teacher, I may ask: "Is this child reaching the short term objectives for this school year?" "Does he have educational needs to which I should respond?"

One family I know wears all kinds of hats, and therefore could raise all kinds of questions about schools. The wife is an elementary school principal; the husband, a teacher. They have two children, and the husband runs a very successful photo processing business. In that couple I see parent, school administrator, teacher, local businessman. The questions they ask from under each of their hats alerts us to the information needs that people have for judging the success of schooling. Answering these questions requires assessment data.

Administrator questions

The administrator (school principal) is concerned with meeting state and local guidelines. She is the agent who certifies that the school marches to a recognizable drumbeat. She also reassures parents that the school's program gives their children the skills and the knowledge that will enable them to succeed in school and in life. Her questions resemble these:

Does the curriculum match the legal guidelines?
Do we have performance evidence to show the public?

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Are we maintaining or improving our competitive position?

Teacher questions

Teachers usually concern themselves with short term issues, that is, what needs to be accomplished this year within the school's curriculum or from the teacher's own set of objectives? Teachers certainly want to make sure that the tasks they assign are developmentally appropriate, but they probably don't worry much about the competitiveness of the school. If most of the children in the class are able to manage the classroom tasks, teachers accept those activities as age-appropriate. They are concerned, of course, with questions of interest and of short term performance.

Are the children accomplishing this years objectives?
Are they interested in the tasks (books) that we assign?
How can I show the successes and the weaknesses to parents?

Parent questions

Parents want their children to be happy in current school activity, but their long-range vision for their children calls for success in post-secondary education and in the workplace. That's the reason why unfavorable comparisons between American schools and foreign schools raise the parents' level of anxiety. If the average American child performs significantly lower than those in other industrialized countries, it bodes ill for our children's future job security. That explains the current paradox in which schools and teachers push to create an environment that appeals heavily to the children's interests, while parents insist that their children demonstrate skilled performance in reading, English, math, and science. So parents ask these types of questions about schooling:

Is my child interested and motivated?
Where does my child stand on the developmental track to success?
Will he be able to go to college?
Will he have the skills to get a good job?
Is this school competitive? With other schools? With other countries?

Community questions

The general community and the business people want their schools to attract people to the community. And they want to feel that the local schools will provide responsible citizens in the future. Their own well-being as employers and as retired people depends on the competitive nature of the schools and on the values that the schools help to transmit.

At a breakfast meeting with a group of non-educators, I asked the other five people at my table what kinds of information they wanted to have about the quality of their local

schools. They replied with these questions:

Are we competitive with other schools around the state?

Will our kids be able to go to any college that they choose?

Will our kids be able to compete for jobs with the Japanese and the Germans?

What should parents and the community do to lift the level of performance in our schools?

Children's questions

As is the case with any learner or worker, children want to feel that they are making progress in something that is important. Though they gradually define for themselves what they think is important, they are influenced heavily by their parents and teachers. If parents and teachers keep asking them if they are having fun in school, the children will naturally think that having fun represents a major criterion for success in school. Good grades, solving problems, getting along with classmates, scoring well on performance tests--all of these are possibilities for feeling successful, depending on what parents and teachers seem to emphasize. So children's questions begin to reflect their need to make progress towards something significant:

Am I having fun?

Can I do well in science experiments?

Do I seem to do as well as the other kids?

Am I praised for being on the "right track" (whatever that track is)?

Different audiences, different questions

Since each audience, each role, asks slightly different questions, the information needed to answer those questions is different. Therein lies the fallacy of most of our discussions about educational assessment--we want to answer all those questions with one type of information. In the past, we thought that norm-referenced tests (tests that rank students) was all the testing we needed. We realize that theory failed, but now educators and legislators are trying to make the same mistake with "portfolio assessment." They seem to think that by collecting various samples of children's work schools will be able to satisfy all its information needs, that is, to answer all the questions listed above.

Unless the portfolio is defined as including normed tests and performance tests, many questions will remain unanswered.

The purpose of having a variety of assessment instruments and techniques, therefore, is not simply to allow educators to pick and choose according to their philosophical preferences. The purpose of having work samples, normed tests, performance tests, and anecdotal records is to gather appropriate information for the people who are wearing all kinds of different hats. Each hat represents an important constituency for our schools, and they deserve to have their questions answered with valid and reliable

data.

Figure 1 lists the typical questions asked by different people and the kinds of information needed to answer those questions. An analysis of those information needs reveals commonalities as well as differences. The general public, and therefore administrators, are interested in knowing about the competitive position of the school. That requires normed data, normed tests. Everyone shows an interest in performance results, that is, the child's ability to perform key tasks, such as, recognizing propaganda or writing a coherent letter requesting information. Collecting performance data on identified tasks, therefore, helps answer a question on the lips of every constituent on the public school scene.

Assessment Answers

Besides the common question about performance on certain authentic tasks, each constituent, each role, deserves answers to its legitimate questions. Schools have a responsibility to answer those questions. Developers of curriculum programs, too, have a responsibility to show school personnel how to collect data that answer those assessment questions. It is inadequate for a developer to say: "We've included every kind of test we can think of. Take your pick." An assessment program needs the same kind of strategic design that teachers expect to find in the teachers' planning guide for a basic text series.

Figure 2 represents major constituents who ask assessment questions, showing some overlap and some distinctive differences. Even a simplistic diagram such as Figure 2 helps us see that different audiences need different kinds of assessment data, different kinds of information. It indicates a way that school systems can clarify the tasks involved in providing identifiable audiences with answers to their questions. It reminds us that a single device for assessing curriculum and instruction lies in the land of mythology not in the land of the living. It is the beginning of a strategy for answering assessment questions.

FIGURE 1

SAMPLE RESPONSIBILITIES

AREAS	ACTIONS	DATA NEEDS
<u>Parents</u>	<u>Parents</u>	<u>Parents</u>
1. Create expectations	Discuss future realities Build confidence	1. Performance reward standards
2. Literacy support	Read stories Surround with books	2. Resources
3. Cooperate with School	Learn school objectives Help with homework	3. Performance on objectives
4. Educational choices	Decide on best for child Listen and choose school/books	4. Citizenship standards Measures v. jobs/ education
<u>Teachers</u>	<u>Teachers</u>	<u>Teachers</u>
1. Progress in curriculum	Clarify objectives and benefits Relate short term to long term Report Progress	1. Performance records
2. Individual interests	Help children clarify and expand Respond to individual needs	2. Personal samples
3. Cooperate with parents	Keep parents informed Establish joint objectives	3. Work samples Competitive info
4. Incentives	Promote learning through external Promote intrinsic incentives	4. Public standards Private curiosity

Figure 1 (cont.)

AREAS	ACTIONS	DATA NEEDS
<u>Children</u>	<u>Children</u>	<u>Children</u>
1. Interests	Show enthusiasm Express personal interests	1. Interest list Work Samples
2. Work completion	Apply attention Manage time efficiently Show progress	2. Progress charts Work displays
3. Be curious	Ask questions Take effective notes	3. Special projects Books used
4. Search cooperatively	Know resources Play roles Work with teachers and parents	4. List of functions
<u>Administrators</u>	<u>Administrators</u>	<u>Administrators</u>
1. Set goals	Inform all parties Mark progress	1. Goals and objectives Performance information
2. Quality instruction	Provide inservice Describe public standards Reassure value of schooling	2. List of workshops Normed data
3. Cooperate with parents and teachers	Integrative services Report on progress	3. Performance samples Competitive info
4. Honor public trust	Display public values/ citizenship Show common competencies Compare public performances Show competitiveness of school	4. Anecdotes Performance criteria Comparative data

FIGURE 2

ASSESSMENT AUDIENCES

